

# Grouping for Learning

*As perhaps never before in world history, individuals are being valued for their ability to connect with other individuals and to help the groups to which they belong to be harmonious and productive.*

Anderson & Pavan 1993

Children benefit from flexible grouping which allows the teacher to instruct students on the basis of interests and learning needs. When children are grouped by their interests more often than by other characteristics (such as skill level) the opportunities to learn from each other are maximized. Children need chances to learn cooperatively and to experience the value of collaboration. Ultimately, social interaction leads to better understanding and a consolidation of learning.

Students achieve best when groupings are varied and flexible. Groupings should provide opportunities for each child to interact with a variety of children and adults. It must not involve tracking, extra year programs and retention.

The composition of groups affects not only how and what children learn but also the way children feel about themselves and the way they relate to each other. Long-term, static ability grouping affects children negatively. Anderson & Pavan (1993) suggest that teachers:

- Assign students to heterogeneous classrooms.
- Regroup for homogeneity for teaching specific skills only.
- Assess children in skill groups frequently so those no longer needing such instruction will be assigned to different groups.

Tracking, the sorting of children by ability or prior performance for long periods of time, and retention, repeating the same grade or course, are harmful to children. Reports in 1985 by Oakes (cited in Saphier & Gower, 1997) state, "Well documented examinations of tracking in the U.S. show conclusively that low track students are systematically disadvantaged by low expectation, less opportunity to learn, less interesting materials, and less interesting teaching." Tracking is unnecessary when the teacher accepts children's current levels of functioning and then focuses on helping them progress from there during each school term. Instruction is designed to meet the individual needs of each child instead of relying solely on grade/age level objectives.

Extra year programs are a form of tracking which isolates children from peers based on external factors. This is especially true for boys and youngsters of color. The composition of groups affects not only how and what children learn but also the way children feel about themselves and the way they relate to each other. Saphier and Gower show that, "The damage to self-esteem and motivation that befalls elementary children labeled 'low-track' is deep and permanent and shows up later in secondary school performance. The cost is not only their self-esteem, but also their interest and motivation."

## References

Anderson, R. H. & Pavan, B. N. (1993). *Nongradedness: Helping it to happen*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Co., Inc.

Saphier, J. & Gower, R. (1997). *The skillful teacher: Building your teaching skills*. Massachusetts: Research for Better Teaching, Inc.